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The former deputy CIA director, Bobby R. Inman, and members of the intelligence committee are protesting elements of a high-priority drive to expand covert actions abroad.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Inman said the underlying reason the committee voted along party lines was a staff report criticizing U.S. intelligence-gathering in Central America.

Committee officials promptly rejected Inman's claim that disputes over covert action colored the report, saying the staff members who wrote the critique were not even involved in reviewing covert activities.

Although no one disclosed what covert actions were protested, Inman's statement is the first time any ranking member of the U.S. intelligence community has suggested that an oversight committee has made a series of objections about ongoing operations.

Inman said the committee Democrats have written letters to President Reagan critical of CIA covert actions. He said he believed some of those letters were critical of actions in Central America. Published reports have said Reagan approved a covert action plan for Central America last fall.

Only one critical letter had previously come to light. In July 1981, sources said the committee complained about a plan directed against the radical government of Libya's Moammar Khadafy.

Inman said it was just such protest letters that sparked his concern.

"What really troubles me is that here in the oversight process they have let sharply different views about covert action creep into what appears to be a critique on substantive intelligence," Inman said. "That's what really lies underneath the split and the criticism."

Inman, who resigned as an unpaid consultant to the committee because of the report, also complained that the 23-page document reflected a bias against U.S. policy in Central America.

He also complained that it failed to say a key House briefing on alleged outside control of the Salvadoran insurgency was given by operational officials "deeply enmeshed" in covert actions, not by intelligence analysts.

Inman, a retired Navy admiral who stepped down as deputy CIA director June 10, said this distinction should have been made because these "operational personnel" are less analytical and less objective than "substantive intelligence people."

However, in a statement issued late Thursday, Rep. Charles Rose, D-N.C., chairman of the Intelligence oversight subcommittee, said only two of 18

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